COIN AND COMPANY FUSION CELL OPERATIONS

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A Company, 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division was deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in the spring of 2008 to the Salman Pak area of Baghdad. The company was comprised of an infantry headquarters section, two mechanized infantry rifle platoons and the battalion scout platoon.

In the contemporary operating environment, it has been demonstrated that company-level fusion cells are an increasingly effective tool that enables company commanders to respond to and neutralize threats within their area of operations while also creating a more detailed and comprehensive picture of their key terrain — the local population. Commanders who do not emphasize the implementation of this concept face challenges that would be less daunting and much easier to handle if the time were taken to train personnel to utilize the fusion cell concept at the company level. These challenges include understanding complex tribal associations and regional dynamics, maintaining a relevant and comprehensive picture of lethal targeting in zone, and executing effective relief-in-place operations within the company itself and when the unit is replaced at the end of its deployment.

Given that the population is the key terrain in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, understanding tribal affiliations and family trees is essential. The fact that areas of operation (AOs) for land-owning companies are getting bigger enforces the point that a dedicated intelligence cell in the company will be needed just to get a functional

During a patrol, Soldiers with A Company, 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment,

understanding of who's who in an area. Knowing who leaders are, whom they trust, who they are related to, and if they are an asset as opposed to a liability are just a few questions that must be answered and then presented in a way that can be used and submitted to higher in order for COIN operations to be successful. Also, seeing how tribal affiliations fit into the greater picture of regional dynamics is a key task. Small unit leaders gather this information through

stop to check the identification badge of a Sons of Iraq leader.

company priority intelligence requirements (PIR) and local leader engagements, but obtaining a working picture of the entire company AO is too large of a job to be done well by the company commander alone. A dedicated intelligence section eases this burden.

The fusion cell eases the tracking and distribution of lethal targeting information. Though lethal operations are often considered a shaping operation as opposed to a decisive operation in the COIN fight, they are still a vital step in the path between a fully mature insurgency and a safe and

stable society. The information gathered by small unit leaders and synthesized in the fusion cell makes it much easier for the company commander to react to new threats and anticipate future problems in his AO. Company fusion cells reporting to task force S2s facilitate higher quality

targeting information at the task force and brigade combat team levels, which pays dividends for the maneuver units on the ground as well.

Most company teams experience a transition in leadership at some point in the deployment. Company commanders and platoon leaders are often switched out and move on to other duties while the company is deployed. Even after a well-executed transition new leaders will still have questions that need to be answered about the people and the enemy in zone. Even more vital then intra-unit moves is the transfer of authority between outgoing and incoming units.

Illustrating the usefulness of this tool, this article will give an example of its implementation by A Company, 2-6 IN, 2nd BCT, 1st AD. The fire support officer (FSO), platoon leaders, and company commander will each share their experiences working with the fusion cell and identify some specific instances of when the fusion cell aided in the accomplishment of the company's mission and how it operated day to day.

FSO (Fusion Cell OIC)
Fusion Cell Structure and Development

Company fusion cell teams are most often led by the company FSO who is supported by his fire support team (FIST) section. My team included myself, my fire support NCO (FSNCO) and one 13F Soldier; the rest of my 13Fs were pushed to the maneuver platoons. At one point I had a night crew that was another NCO and Soldier. However, even though the extra personnel was nice, it's important to remember that it's all about working with what you have. Depending on what we were doing, the commander would either task me or my FSNCO to find an answer to whatever problem we wanted to solve.

Coming fresh from the Field Artillery Officer Basic Course and being tasked to manage a fusion cell team, there were many questions I didn't have answers to; the first and most obvious was "what is a fusion cell?" We were basically a company-level S2 shop and started off producing graphics by utilizing the tactical ground reporting (TiGR) system for the corresponding maneuver platoon that requested it. From there stemmed more products which eventually made it seem as though we were acting more like a service shop than an intelligence shop; it was frustrating. This lasted for about the first three months, and even though we were helping the company, my team didn't really feel that we were contributing to the fight as much as we could. This all changed in August. We moved from a product development phase and into more of an offensive phase.

My FSNCO began to formulate a names of interest (NOI) list by logging every local national (LN) we encountered into an Excel spreadsheet. This was an extremely slow process at first, but if it is done from the beginning it can pay vast dividends to the company and higher after several months of data entry. There were many columns under our list that we could search by, but there were four main entries we searched under (first name, middle name, last name, abu name). The purpose of dividing the names into separate categories is that it makes the searching much more efficient. For example, if there is a report stating that the first name is Hussayn, the middle and last name are unknown and the abu name is Jasim, it will only take seconds to search by the sections of names rather than if they were grouped together.

Our team began transitioning from being a product-making support shop to an offensive tool. Making products became a framework operation that wasn't needed as much, while targeting and link analysis became the main effort. This was the main cycle of our lethal targeting:

1. Reading the intelligence summary (INTSUM) and looking for names particularly in the collected data and tactical reports (TACREPS) that applied to our company operating environment (OE);

2. Going through our NOI list and other link diagram charts we had made to see if there was a match;

3. Compiling the information and presenting it to the commander;

4. Developing the PIR for the platoons to go out and obtain; and

5. After we had a good base of information on the target, we would send it up to the TF.

On today's battlefield, I have found that the overall data management is really what makes or breaks a good fusion cell. Being able to reference a name or key locations in a timely manner will greatly augment the fight at the company level.

In addition to this, our duties included making a daily read book from all the patrols and intelligence summaries for the day, managing our interpreters (phone calls to local leaders and giving them their SP time for the next day's mission), managing the task force census operations, developing our company PIR to distribute to the platoons, managing all of our Sons of Iraq (SOI), and having myself or my FSNCO accompany the commander on every mission he went on. Reading patrol debriefs and going out of the wire gives an entire different view of the OE. In addition to all of the previously mentioned duties, we also conducted a monthly artillery and mortar registration every month (we would switch mortar and artillery between C Company).

Since I was considered the "effects guy," I was also in charge of being the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) pay agent for the company. This meant I was paying money out to local leaders for jobs they did for us. One example was a public works contract for 30 workers who picked up the trash on the street to mitigate IEDs. Later in the deployment we started a micro-grant program where small business' that needed some extra materials could submit applications to get extra funding.

Doing intelligence is definitely an acquired taste and more like a strange form of art. Every piece of information a patrol receives and brings back to be processed may not seem like it means anything, just like a spot on the wall. However, the more time spent in the area means more information, which means more spots. Eventually these spots will start to form a picture of what is going on. Having a clear picture equals being able to know what the next step is.

This was the basic groundwork on what our fusion cell did to be effective and help out the maneuver platoons. Although there are many different ways to accomplish the mission, the following examples given by each platoon leader were some of the tactics that worked with our company.

Scout Platoon Leader
Knowing the Population

In the first few months of the deployment, one the company's biggest non-lethal targeting operations was reigning in and imposing a set of rules upon the Sons of Iraq. This was part of a battalion-wide effort to organize and control the SOI. In my platoon's

AO, there were six SOI contracts that employed more than 600 local nationals. Just a few months earlier, these men were critical in driving out al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) from a hotly contested region. By midsummer though, the area was secure, and it was time to move on. Despite knowing this was not a permanent solution or lasting institution, many local nationals were reluctant to return to their farms. They remembered the bad times and did not want to give up their easy, profitable job of standing by a roadside checkpoint with an AK-47. Alpha Company and the Gator Battalion worked with local sheikhs to reduce the number of SOI. This forced local nationals to return to their farms and other pervious jobs, getting the local economy back on track. Once the number of SOI was reduced, it was time to implement new, tighter control measures. The old ID cards were collected, preventing unemployed SOI from walking around the streets with their AK-47s claiming to be working. We established permanent, static checkpoints. Mobile patrols were eliminated. Finally, new ID cards and uniforms were issued, turning the SOI into a quasi-private security company.

At the company level, the SOI was the fusion cell's baby. In one lone, sweltering week, hundreds of SOI were processed. This entailed photographing, recording names, and collecting biometric data. Then the real work began. The line platoons dropped off the data at the company command post (CP), leaving the fusion cell to correlate and create a useful product. The fusion cell managed dozens of different contracts that employed hundreds of LNs. They stored biometric information, checkpoint data, and contract status for each sheikh, SOI supervisor, and worker. The fusion cell created, printed, and laminated hundreds of ID cards. The platoons rapidly distributed them, giving the new SOI legitimacy. Eventually, the SOI was handed over to the Government of Iraq (GOI) and the Iraqi Army, but the SOI the GOI managed was a vastly different organization than the SOI originally in the company's AO.

Another large task for the fusion cell was to store census data. One of the battalion's framework operations was a census of the area. In addition to being a powerful tool for mapping the human terrain, the census delivered the intangible benefits of letting LNs interact with coalition forces and see the men behind the body armor. So, while

Soldiers with 3rd Platoon, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment conduct census operations south of Salman Pak, Iraq.

individual local nationals saw CF's friendly faces in a personal environment, CF gathered PIR and collected data on the population. Each adult male was entered into the Handheld Interagency Identity Detection Equipment (HIIDE) system. The head of each household also answered a questionnaire. Upon returning to the COP, questionnaires and HIIDEs were turned into the fusion cell. Using a unique data organization system, the fusion cell tracked which houses were missing data and which houses were complete. Doing the census provided an easy cover for an informal cordon and search of a suspected anti-Iraqi forces (AIF) house. Once that house was visited, would-be insurgents realized their fingerprints and residences were logged, deterring them from future activity.

When a few houses had to be revisited for a cordon and search or for a raid, the data collected during the census was invaluable in helping plan for the raid. A CF platoon from within the battalion had already been on the ground, collected data regarding who lived in the house, and taken pictures of the males and building's entrance and layout. This was a great tool for mission preparation. On one occasion, our company was tasked with conducting a raid in Charlie Company's AO. Charlie had been doing an all-day cordon and search. Alpha

Company's fusion cell could coordinate with its Charlie Company counterpart and access data on the target house. So, even though no Alpha Company units had been to that house, they knew the layout of the village's block and the house's courtyard. Another example occurred just before a SIGINT raid where the planned infiltration route came from the south. One of the platoon leaders remembered the entrance to the courtyard was on the north side of the house. If the current plan was used, the assault element would have had to run around the block. With this information, a new route was used, and the assault element moved onto the objective quickly and effectively.

1st Platoon Leader
Lethal Targeting

In COIN, lethal targeting is a shaping operation rather than a decisive operation, but it is still a critical part of overall success. The A Company fusion cell made significant contributions to lethal targeting by developing target packets and combing intelligence from census operations with lethal missions. The cell was adept at identifying both friends and enemies and providing line platoons the necessary information to neutralize targets.

The fusion cell's census data was an

invaluable resource for forming the comprehensive intelligence from often fragmentary battalion reporting. A battalion-level report might indicate that, in a conversation between Abu Ahmed and Abu Mohamed, Abu Mohamed said that he was angry because Abu Abdullah, an SOI member from village A with many brothers in the SOI, was preventing him from planting IEDs. Fusion cell could then examine the census data from village A and find out who had children named Ahmed, Mohamed, and Abdullah, and then began to narrow down their identities. In a case very similar to that described above, fusion cell was able to identify one of the potential IED emplacers and the SOI who was preventing IED emplacement. This was doubly valuable because A Company then not only knew the enemy in village A, but also knew an SOI member who was committed to security and could possibly be used as a future source. With the census data, the fusion cell was able to piece together such intelligence on a daily basis.

Combining census operations with company intelligence also fostered better mission execution. For example, battalion intelligence identified a house in our AO as the home of a possible AQI intelligence cell member. The A Company census tracker identified the house and showed that only partial information had been gathered on the occupants as some of the males had not been home during the initial visit. During the next census operation in that village, 1st Platoon returned to the house to gather additional data, but this time conducted an informal cordon and search in which we observed the exits in order to see if anyone attempted to leave the house upon our arrival and conducted a search of the house rather than the standard walk-through. Nothing was found, but 1st Platoon gathered more complete information on the occupants and it was believed that such unexpected appearances by CF act as a deterrent to insurgents.

A Company's fusion cell combined battalion intelligence with company intelligence, generated from knowledge of the population, to facilitate better planning and execution of lethal targeting. This allowed our company to correctly discriminate threats from the general population and execute raids to neutralize these threats.

3rd Platoon Leader
Leadership Transition

As a new platoon leader, I met my platoon down range halfway through their 15-month tour in Iraq, I had not yet heard of the company fusion cell concept. I knew little about what resources and capabilities the fusion cell could offer a new platoon leader to facilitate better mission planning. The support and input that they offered greatly enhanced my mission planning and executing ability.

Shortly after being given my platoon, I was tasked to conduct a joint patrol with our local Iraqi Army (IA) unit in order to clear a known road that contained several suspected IEDs on it. Prior to executing the mission, the fusion cell contacted the IA commander in order to coordinate for the patrol. The fusion cell also provided me with detailed maps of the targeted area, since I was still fairly unfamiliar with the area of operations. Lastly, the fusion cell was able to provide me with the latest intelligence on the known and suspected enemy presence within the area. Three weeks before conducting this mission, a HMMWV from our company had hit an IED in the same area. Thus, the fusion cell was able to provide me with a copy of the debrief from that mission, which allowed me to better understand what to look for on this and future missions, in terms of IEDs used in our AO.

The IED clearance mission went off well, and by having the fusion cell leader out on the patrol as well, he was able to document and note all of the IEDs and their detonators as they were found. The success from the initial route clearance mission led to a second joint patrol with the IA and this mission too proved to be a success. The difference between the first and the second mission, however, was the fact that the fusion cell produced and distributed a slide show which covered all of the IEDs and the detonators that were found during the first mission. Thus, my men were better prepared and enabled to look for and find the IEDs on the second mission. Upon completion of the second IED mission, the fusion cell once again made and distributed an IED slide show for everyone in the company to learn from. This dissemination of enemy TTPs, subsequently helped ensure everyone's safety when moving around the company's AO.

Company Commander

As this was my second command in Iraq, I had some previous experiences with trying to identify, understand, and fight the enemy. In my previous deployment, I had command in two different zones of operation. The first was the most peaceful of the task force's zones and the next was arguably the most active. In my first zone I had a FO who helped to collect and analyze the intelligence we gathered in zone. In my second, I did not have someone to do that piece for the first few weeks as the FSO was wounded in action and not replaced until later. I had to learn to become my own company intelligence section. It was tough. Most of my mental energy was spent trying to develop my understanding of the enemy: what he was trying to accomplish, how we stop that, how we target him and how we ultimately succeed. I learned a thing or two and decided to implement those lessons in my second command. Fortunately, my company had a fusion cell that was open to my guidance and worked to make it happen. They made my job easier and allowed me to focus on the problems in our zone. By doing the things previously discussed in the article, we succeeded as a company team. We helped to continue the work of our predecessors and set our replacements up for greater success.

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CPT Brendan Collins graduated from Boston College in May 2006. He served as the 2nd and Scout Platoon Leader during the deployment. He is currently attending the Military Intelligence Captains' Career Course.

MAJ Augustine Gonzales graduated from the United States Military Academy in May 1999 and served as the commander of A Company, 1st Battalion, 36th Infantry during OIF 05-07 and the commander of A/2-6IN during this deployment. He is currently the commander for A/3-4 IN.